Interviewee: Mohamed Al-Hamdani (MAH)

Interviewer: Bridget Bonanni (BB), journalism student at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio.

Also present: Emma Hendy, journalism student at Miami; Hayley Green of Catholic Social Services of Miami Valley; Annie-Laurie Blair, associate clinical lecturer in journalism at Miami University.

Date: November 8, 2019

Location: Dayton Public Library, 215 E 3rd St, Dayton, Ohio 45402

Bridget Bonanni (BB): Okay, great. I'm Bridget. I'm a student at Miami University, a journalism student. Today is November 8th (2019), and we're conducting this interview in Dayton, Ohio's, Public Library main branch location. If we could just start by you saying your full name.

Mohamed Al-Hamdani (MAH): Sure. Mohamed Al-Hamdani.

BB: Okay.

MAH: Want me to spell that for you?

BB: I think we have it from some records. Don't worry. Okay, so you were born in Iraq?

MAH: I was born in Iraq, yeah. 1981, a long time ago.

BB: Yeah. If you don't mind me asking, and so how long did you live in Iraq for?

MAH: We lived there until 1990. I was there until I was 9 years old. *(ED NOTE: Later clarifies that he was 11 when he arrived in the U.S. in 1992.)*

BB: Okay.

MAH: (Early) 1990s when we left. You know, there was a gulf war with Kuwait, and then the United States got involved and bombed the crap out of Iraq. Sent us back to the stone ages, and then, there was an uprising against Saddam and my dad was part of that uprising. Of course, they lost, so we were forced into refugee camps in Saudi Arabia.

BB: Wow, okay. So, I was going to ask about that. I knew the Gulf War was occurring at the time that you ended up leaving Iraq. So that's the reason that you left?

MAH: I mean, the Gulf War ended, and the real reason is the uprising happened -- Shiite uprisings and Kurdish uprisings against the regime, and you know, when my dad became a part of that, he was forced out of the country... because he was fighting. Then, a few months later -- we thought he was dead, actually. My Mom thought he was dead. There was my

Mom, my older brother, two younger brothers and my younger sister at the time. So it was five kids, and we try to make it. Some lady shows up at the door, I think at like two o'clock in the morning in the middle of the summer, and says, "Your dad is actually across the border, and he is in a refugee camp and we're going to smuggle you overnight. So they smuggled us out of the country in construction trucks, essentially, to the desert. It was just kind of an interesting thing for a child. I was nine years old at the time, yeah.

BB: Do you have a memory of that time?

MAH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, vivid memories of that. As a young child, I mean, I remember the Gulf War. You know, F-16s bombing our city. Things like that -- the fighting, so yeah. It was an interesting time. That was really the main reason we were forced out. We were in the refugee camp for about two years in Saudi Arabia, and it was like a full refugee camp. You know, we lived in a tent, essentially. There was no running water for a while. I mean, they never had running water. It had to be transported. Electricity -- there was no civilization. Near the desert in tents for a long time. You know, we were lucky we got out in two years and came to the United States in 1992. September of '92, so we were lucky we got out in two years. Some families were stuck for 10 to 15 years in that refugee camp, so yeah. We were sponsored by, at the time it was called World Church Services, which is now Catholic Social Services, and (by) a local mosque here in Dayton, Ohio. So, you know, we got to New York in '92, and they said, "You're going to Dayton." We had no idea what that meant. We're like, "Okay." So we ended up here in Dayton, Ohio.

BB: You said you spent two years in the refugee camp?

MAH: Yeah, two years. The refugee camp was an interesting place. You know, you had a 100,000 people living in tents. People who had just escaped war and escaped famine and escaped fighting, and the crazy thing is that we were Shiite Muslims. The country that was hosting us was Saudi Arabia, which is very anti-Shiism. So, it was one of those things where it was a lot of -- always friction between the refugees and the government over there. We were sponsored -- the refugee camp was under the sponsorship of the U.N., so there was some protection from that. I mean, to the Saudis' credit, they provided food and water. They tried to provide us most services, and after a while, they tried to school and things for young kids. It became apparent that the refugees were going to be stuck. I mean, Saddam Hussein was going to be in power for a long time. There was no end in sight, so they started doing a little bit more.

BB: Oh, wow. So it was after you left when they started?

MAH: They started a little bit when we were there. About a year and a half into it, you know, like I had a half a year of schooling while I was in that refugee camp. Yeah, it was interesting. You know, I mean, we lived in the desert in the middle of nowhere. It was just one of those crazy experiences to go through as a child. I can't imagine what it was like for my parents.

BB: Yeah, and did you have siblings there?

MAH: I had three brothers and one sister at the time. By the time we came here, my mom was pregnant with my second sister. We had six kids altogether.

BB: Oh, wow. Six kids at the refugee camp?

MAH: Five kids at the refugee camp.

BB: And she was pregnant --

MAH: She was pregnant with my sister when we were there.

BB: Oh, wow. So do you remember any memories from your day-to-day life?

MAH: Boring. I mean as a child, you're sitting around. There's nothing to do. You know, but kids will be kids. We started games like soccer with fake balls that we made. And then we started, you know, hanging out. It was, in a weird way, more freedom for kids because there was nothing to do. So we could stay out as late -- it's not like you could get in trouble; it's in the middle of the desert. But at the same time, there was a sense of despair and hopelessness. I remember sensing that from the adults in my family because they, you know, my mom called her mother before we left Iraq and told her we'll be back in a few months or a few weeks. My mom never ever got to see her mom again. So it's just one of those things where you just remember -- the sense of despair and hopelessness. At first, they all -- the adults thought that we'll be back in Iraq soon, you know, the U.S. will help us topple Saddam in a year. Saddam didn't get toppled until 2010 *(ED NOTE: Correct year is 2003)*. He got caught around 2009 *(ED NOTE: Also 2003. He was convicted of crimes against humanity by the Iraqi High Tribunal in 2006, sentenced to death and hanged in December 2006.)...*, but you know, it's just one of those things that you don't want to remember.

BB: Yeah, exactly. Did you really know what was going on in Iraq?

MAH: Yeah, as a child, you do remember that stuff because you start living as an adult almost. Your parents have to be very honest with you because there are people dying, and you know, bombs. So they were very honest like, "You've got to be careful; this can kill you Don't go over here. This will be bombed." You remember that when you hear the sirens, you've got to hide. Those are things that you become very acceptable of it, essentially. But you do remember, and it just becomes part of everyday life. It's crazy to think that children -- It's happening to this day. It becomes part of everyday life. You just kind of go on living your life, and you don't know what's going to happen.

BB: Exactly.

MAH: There's that sense of -- you know, we all think we're in control of our lives until something crazy like that happens, and then you realize you have no control over anything. It's one of those crazy situations, yeah.

BB: Exactly, yeah, so your parents were pretty transparent with you about --

MAH: Yeah, I think that's probably the right thing to do with your children. Especially, you know, to help them understand. Alright, there's war happening. There's, I don't know, bombs falling. People die from this stuff. Refugee camps -- just make you understand that you're in a camp, not in a country. You're not a citizen of this country. It's one of those things that, as an adult, or now that I'm a father, I can envision -- you walk your kids through it, and tell them that this is what the situation is. You try to sugarcoat as much as you can, but children can sense that no matter what, you know?

BB: Yeah, exactly, and do you remember if you thought that you were going home at any time soon? How did you feel?

MAH: Yeah, for a long time, I did. I think even the first two years that we were in the United States, I thought we'd be back there soon. You know, you have friends and family, uncles and cousins, grandfathers and grandmothers, you know, you develop those relationships and then you're separated. You know, first to the refugee camp and then to the United States. The funny thing is that when we came to the United States in 1992, there was the election of Clinton, and then a year later, he bombs Iraq again. Everybody's thinking, you know, 1993 -- I don't know, you probably weren't even born at the time.

BB: Yeah, I wasn't. '99.

MAH: I graduated high school. The reality is, you know at that time, people thought that Saddam is going to be gone now. Clinton's going to get rid of him, and that didn't happen (right away). So there was always that -- my parents and my family, I think after a while, about five years here in the United States, we realized we're never going back. You just realize that, and then you start developing friendship here. Just start having the ties here.

BB: Yeah, so that took about like five years?

MAH: It's different for everybody. I think for me it probably took two to three years, but for my parents, it probably was longer. You know, they were a lot older when they came here. They were in their forties. I was eleven.

BB: Yeah, so they lived their whole lives --

MAH: Whole lives over there. So to come here and think that we'll be here for a while. Yeah, it's hard to -- I can't imagine what it was like for my younger siblings, who probably didn't even understand what was going on. You know what I mean?

BB: Yeah. How old were your younger siblings?

MAH: I was 11. Ali was 8. [unclear] was about 6, and my sister was 4. Then I had an older brother who was 13. I was the second oldest. There's like two years between all of us. It's almost like a Catholic family.

BB: Yeah, it is. So just to be clear, you were 11 when you came to the United States?

MAH: Yeah.

BB: Okay, and you got to New York, then you were sent to Dayton?

MAH: So we got to New York and they start sorting you out. You know, as long as -- there's about like 500 of us that came from the refugee camp in Saudi Arabia. We arrive in New York, and they're separating families like you go here, you go there. We were in New York for a few days, and then they said, "All right, you know, we have your sponsorship done with Catholic Social Services. We're going to send you to Dayton, Ohio, where a mosque has sponsored you."

We're like, okay. It's not like we knew where Dayton, Ohio, was. You come from to desert to the United States, and you know, there's skyscrapers in New York. I mean, the flight was from Saudi Arabia in the middle of the desert to Paris, which is the city of lights, and then to New York, you know, the city that never sleeps, right? As a kid you're looking like, what the hell is going on? This much different. There was culture shock for sure. You know, it's just one of those things where you don't realize how different life is in different places of the world until you start travelling. So yeah, we got to New York and they were like -- told my Dad we're going to Dayton, and he was like, "We're going to Dayton." We're like, "What does that even mean? What is Dayton? Is a Dayton a thing?" But it was. It's a really -- I think we got lucky because Dayton is a very different kind of town in the middle of Ohio. You know, Ohio is different. It was very welcoming. Easy to assimilate into. We got a neighborhood that had a mosque, and they had Catholic Social Services helping out. I think we kind of came to the right place for our family. I don't know, I think we just kind of hit the lottery when it comes to a city to be -- to adopt you as refugees.

BB: Yeah, from New York to Dayton is definitely a difference.

MAH: Some families -- a lot of Iraqis end up, like most Middle-Eastern people, they end up in Michigan, which is crazy to think about, right? It's really cold there. But Dearborn, Michigan, is like the largest group of middle-easterners outside the Middle East.

BB: Oh, wow.

MAH: Yeah, at one point, my Mom and Dad thought about moving there, but I'm glad they didn't. Dayton's been really good to us.

BB: Yeah, definitely. So you went to school in Dayton? Or did you go to Wright State (University)?

MAH: Yeah, yeah, so I came here when I was 11. They put me in sixth grade. Based on my age, I think. I tell this story all the time.

BB: You went to public school?

MAH: Oh, yeah, I'm a product of Dayton Public Schools. I went to Dayton Public Schools. I went to Miami Chapel (Elementary), then Fairview Middle, and then Colonel White high school. All those schools have been torn down. They're all [unclear].

BB: Oh, wow.

MAH: And then after I graduated, I went to Wright State University. While I was at Wright State, another war in Iraq breaks out. I didn't really do much. I was very anti-war for a while, and I still am. To this day, I'm anti-war. But then, somewhere in 2007, I got a call from the Department of Defense asking me if I wanted to work for the Department of Defense, and I signed up and worked with the Army and Marines. Went back and did a lot of work with them, then I got lucky and got stationed in San Diego for like three and half or four years. Worked with the Marines for four years, which was part of that exit strategy out of Iraq. To help train the Iraqis, and I really enjoyed that. Probably, made me a different person. I was pretty wild before that. Just like any normal American kid. Then I came back to Dayton in 2010 and went to law school. I went to law school at University of Dayton.

BB: ... You went to the Marines like right after?

MAH: I didn't go to the Marines. I worked with the Department of Defense. I was a contractor, and at first, they put me with the Army for like six or seven months. Then, I got really bored of working with the Army and working in -- at one point, they put me in Columbus, Georgia, and if you can imagine like the smallest town in Ohio, it was smaller than that.

BB: Sure.

MAH: It was like hot and around the border with Alabama. There was nothing there. I got really fat. All I did was eat and sleep and do nothing, you know. They said there was this program, this exit strategy program, potentially with the Marines. Let anybody volunteer. People don't like working with the Marines because they're always frontline. I was like, I'll go. So I volunteered, and from there I was shipped to San Diego to volunteer with the Marines and that got me back in shape really fast. We helped train them by putting them through simulated programs that kind of like (involved) thousands of Iraqi actors and folks. Essentially, built a whole village that looked like Iraq and put the Marines through training about what it's like to live in Iraq before they go there. Help them understand the culture and the language through language and culture immersion training before we sent them over there. That was very successful for a while. It kind of helped the United States draw back from Iraq, and unfortunately, it didn't last very long because Iraq is a mess again, so.

BB: Yeah, okay, so you [unclear] started with the Department of Defense, and then you decided to go and do this specialized training because you were so bored?

MAH: I was bored. I was really bored.

BB: So you wanted to --

MAH: With the Army, like all you did was document review, and I wanted to do more than that, you know. I was like, I'm here reading all these old Iraqi military documents. I (didn't) want to do that all day, every day. I switched to something that was more in line with what I wanted to do. It was more adventurous. You know what I mean?

BB: Exactly, more exciting.

MAH: It was more exciting. It was more dangerous, but you know, my Mom still thinks I'm crazy for doing that. She cried a lot when I left. When I told them I was leaving to go back, they're like, you're crazy. You know, I understand because they left war. They remember it as adults. To me, war was just a memory as a child. To them, it was a lot different since some of their friends and family died in wars. During their lifetime, in Iraq, they had three or four wars. You know what I mean? So, for me it was different. It's different.

BB: Yeah, definitely. You went to law school after?

MAH: I did. I came back to Dayton and went to law school in 2010. I got involved in politics, you know, while I was in law school. Then, I got to start working on President Obama's campaign. I worked with President Obama's campaign. That was really cool. I got to meet him, which was like one of the best things for me.

BB: Really? What did you do for his campaign?

MAH: Yeah, yeah. I did voter protection. I coordinated the voter protection for Montgomery County, which was cool. I got to go to the inaugural ball. For a young kid, that was pretty cool.

BB: Oh, wow.

MAH: I got to go to all that stuff. It was pretty cool. I got involved with the local party here, started working on different things. I graduated law school. I did not take the bar right away. Actually, I started working with local mosques and churches. There was a group called Leaders for Equality and Action. I started working on social justice stuff. After that, I took the bar exam and passed the bar exam. Are you guys familiar with the Human Services Levy of Montgomery County?

BB: No. What's that?

MAH: It's where they support a lot of different people that go through job training, alcohol and drug addiction, or people with disabilities at the job center. It's a very large levy that the country ran for three years. Three to four years, and so, I ran that levy and got it to pass during a really bad year. I was really involved in the politics, and it was really crazy. The chair of the levy was Pam Morris, who at the time was the CEO of CareSource. Sometimes, life just kind of aligns, and as soon as the levy was over, she called me and said that she wanted to hire me at CareSource.

BB: Really?

MAH: Yeah, yeah. Sometimes, you just put yourself out there. I got hired at CareSource and worked there for a while, and I left when she left a few years back. About two years ago. I opened my own immigration law practice and just expanded. I have two different partners and work at Larson, Lyons & Al-Hamdani as a management member. It's an immigration law firm in Dayton.

BB: Oh my gosh, wow.

MAH: Yeah. I've had a full life, and I'm only 38.

BB: It's hard to keep up. Oh my gosh.

MAH: Yeah, yeah. I've done a lot. In 2017, I ran for school board in Dayton, Ohio, and I got elected.

BB: So what's your position?

MAH: I'm on the school board. I'm a member of the school board, and I'm one of, I think, four Muslims elected in the state of Ohio.

BB: Oh, wow.

MAH: I think I'm the only Mohamed in the state of Ohio, too, pretty sure, that's elected. I haven't met another Mohamed that's elected. I've done a lot of crazy stuff like that.

BB: Wow. For your day-to-day life as an attorney, what is that like? What do you do for work every day?

MAH: I help immigrants like my family. I mean, my whole job is to help immigrants who are seeking green cards, citizenship -- that passport that'll get them citizenship of the United States, or help them with different issues. Help fight removals, obviously under the current administration, immigration is kind of harder. People are hiring a lot more attorneys. There's a lot more deportation happening. We've got a lot more deportation, but I also help a lot of local businesses that recruit talented individuals from overseas to help them get their H1-B visas, and then, hopefully get them -- [unclear] just been to green card services and then become citizens. My whole job is to make sure that people who want to be here can stay here. That's how I explain it to people. Immigrants come to America for a very specific reason. They're running away from something, sure. But America's always been that open door, that shining light on the hill that says, you know, we'll take everybody. That's why my family -- we were lucky that we came over here. I can't really imagine what life would be like if we didn't.

BB: Did you want to become an immigration attorney because of your experience with your family and what your family went through?

MAH: No, I think it was an evolution. I think what happened was -- I was making good money at CareSource, but then I became a father and the 2016 election happens. They start

targeting Muslims and immigrants. You look at your children and you're like, what kind of world can I leave for them? What can I do to show them that despite what's on TV and whatever's happened nationally, you can make a difference. In 2016, I decided that I'm leaving my job. It was crazy. I'm going to run for school board and get elected in 2017, which I did, and then I was going to start a practice to help people like me. I think I did all of that just to make sure that when my kids -- I have two boys, Adam and Zachariah. Adam is 4 1/2 now, and Zachariah is about to turn 3 in two weeks. I wanted to make sure that when they grow up, or as they're growing up, they see me doing things that made a difference so they can understand that no matter what your name is, or where you come from, America is for you. And that's tough, you know, it's one of those things that you kind of have to really think about. I made a conscious decision to do that. I guess I got lucky and successful at it, so that's good. You can't say everybody needs to do that because it's tough, you know. I had the educational background to be able to do that. I had a law degree. I had my master's and an MBA, so I can do stuff that most people probably aren't able to do. I have very supportive friends and family that really have always pushed me to kind of go for it, you know?

BB: Definitely. What would you say -- do you have any examples of the cases that you're working on and which clients you're working with?

MAH: I can't divulge too much about clients, particularly, but I mean, there are a lot of stories. There used to be a time when you came to America and presented yourself at the border and asked for asylum to become a refugee, where we treated you better by saying, "All right, you ran away from a bad situation. We'll let you in, and we'll have your hearing at a later date. We'll have an interview now. We're not going to lock you up. You can work, and we'll have your hearing a year or two from now and we'll see whether we approve you." The sad thing is that today, if you present yourself at the border because you're running from bad situations -- and most people are focusing on folks coming from South America, but people do that from all over the world. I have a gentleman from Russia who's doing this. They show up at the border and automatically, we lock them up. There's no question. You're put in -- you know, I went to Louisiana. I'll give you a story. I went to Louisiana, that's where this gentleman is. He's locked up, and you've got a space probably three times the size of this room, which is pretty small. I don't know, what is this? A 12 by 12, or a 12 by 16? There are literally like 40 men sleeping in that space.

BB: Oh my God.

MAH: All right, so that's because we're locking everybody up. We never used to do that. So, we're running out of space. What ends up happening is, now instead of me having a year to prepare for this case, I only have a month and a half, or two months. It's rushed. It's completely rushed. There's no way for me to gather evidence. No way for me to get anything. I get before the judge and I'm presenting a case that's not really complete, but you're kind of forced. It's designed to make sure you lose. I mean, in some courts, especially down South, they only approve 5 to 10 percent of those cases. Everybody else, they're just sending back. It's really sad.

BB: Yeah. Would you say you've experienced, or have you experienced any successes with your cases?

MAH: Yeah, I mean, there have been a lot of successes as well because when you're an attorney, you kind of know the game. But you also are taking losses, you know what I mean? It's a give and take. You succeed more than people doing it on their own, but the success rate goes from 0 percent to 10 percent. Yeah, it's a big jump. A 10 percent jump is still very large. With that said, you know, people who are here legally can face a lot of trouble, too. You can have a green card holder who gets in trouble with the law, and automatically, they become deportable. You know, we don't do that with anybody else. They can have American kids and American wives, and we can still deport them. People don't understand that when we deport somebody, we're saying that you cannot come back for ten years. It's a ten-year bar. Ten years. Once you're deported, you cannot come to the United States for ten years.

BB: Is that for every circumstance of deportation?

MAH: Every circumstance of deportation. You can apply for waivers, but those don't get approved much.

BB: Really? Okay, so now since there's so many like deportations in the past year or so, is that for everyone?

MAH: Yeah, everybody gets a ten-year bar. Once you're -- yeah, a ten-year bar.

BB: It's ten.

MAH: And a lot of these folks will try to come back, they'll just be sent back. You know, if they cross the border illegally and get caught, they'll never be able to come back legally. It's a very tough situation for a lot of folks. They're escaping war and famine and fighting, you know, I can't imagine if my family was told you have to stay in a refugee camp for 20 years. The reality is that there are more refugees today than any time in the history of humanity. And it's not affecting just one area of the world. It's affecting almost every continent in the world except for North America, right? There are refugees in almost every part of the world right now. Unless countries like us take them, I don't know what they're going to do. Some of these folks, you know, will be living in refugee camps for 10 to 15 years. [unclear] No education. You're going to lose generations of children, who could become -- you know, it's wasted potential of children. Who knows what those kids could become. We're saying no, you're going to be stuck in a refugee camp for the rest of your life. What kind of life could they have in a refugee camp? What kind of education could they have? What kind of future will they have? You're essentially wiping out whole generations of people.

BB: Yeah.

MAH: And leaving them in despair. I know, I'm sad and gloomy now, sorry.

BB: No, that's okay. I was wondering, for the new immigration policies that are in place now, how do you think this is going to affect refugees' futures? [unclear]

MAH: Well, I think you're going to start seeing the effect of the policies in ten years, right? I mean, you're going to have -- the reality is that we have a shrinking population in America. Not growing, in the United States. The only way you grow, usually how America grows, is by bringing in immigrants. If we don't, in ten to 15 years, you're going to have a shortage of workers, a shortage of support staff, a shortage of talent in key areas, whether it's engineering and health care, or people who are doing construction. You're going to have a shortage of workers. Baby boomers are going to start retiring, and we don't have the workforce to replace them. That's when you'll start seeing these effects. A lot of what you're seeing right now is families being torn apart, and that's hurtful for us to watch, you know. Kids being torn apart from their parents, that stings, but I think that economically, it'll hurt us in ten years. At that point, we're going to be like, what the hell did we do? You know what I mean? We're placing ourselves in a really bad situation. We're short workers right now, so imagine what it'll be like in ten years when more people retire.

BB: Exactly.

MAH: It's unfortunate that we are in this place, but immigrants make really easy targets for one reason. They don't vote because most of them are not American citizens. They can't vote yet, if they are green card holders, or asylum-seekers, they have no voice. So it's really up to us, who are Americans, to stand up for them and say, "We will not tolerate that." And I'm hopeful, I mean, the last two election cycles have been [unclear]. There have been more immigrants elected since 2016 than any time in the history of the United States.

BB: Oh, wow.

MAH: So you'll see that shift in local politics, statewide politics, and on a national level. I mean, for the first time, we have four Muslims serving Congress. We have four women of color -- more women in Congress, which is amazing, right?

BB: Yeah.

MAH: Those are things that I think, despite the negative things that are happening, there is positive happening because of it, which is people who are saying, "You know what, that's not the America we want. So we're going to fight against it, and I'm hopeful that in 2020, things will go back to the America that I knew. That's why I'm hopeful.

BB: Definitely, you are hopeful.

MAH: Oh, yeah, I think that when you've been through some of the things that refugees have been through -- The funny thing is that I was in the elevator going down, and this guy was like, "Man, I see you in this building, and you're always smiling." Yeah, because nothing really bothers me. When you go through life, you know, when you see things at a younger age, what's the worst thing that could happen to you in America?

BB: You've already, like, seen the worst.

MAH: Yeah, you've seen some of the worst things, so you're always going to be hopeful. You're always going to have that attitude that, you know, things are going to get better. Things will get better. No matter how low things are, or how bad things are, they can get and will get better for people. So yeah, I do believe in that.

BB: What kind of advice would you offer to refugees in refugee camps right now? From when you were in their shoes?

MAH: Don't lose hope. I think once you lose hope, that's when despair really starts to set in. And that there are people out there that are fighting on their behalf. They might not know who they are, or where they are from, but there are a lot of us folks who are working hard to make sure that their voice is heard. And to always believe in the power of their children. To not let them go, and always invest in them. Once the opportunity comes, make sure you don't hold back and get out. That's the other thing. A lot of refugees make the mistake of saying, "No, I'm going to stay because I think I'm going to go back home." That almost never happens.

BB: Yeah, exactly. So when they get the chance, go.

MAH: Go, yes.

BB: Definitely. Do you -- I'm sure you don't really miss home at all, right?

MAH: You know what's really -- I don't miss. I miss it for my parents. I know they miss it, but for me, I was too young when I left the country. I didn't really have a lot of attachments there. When I think of it, I think of sadness. You know what I mean? Because it was really a terrible place for people like my family. I wanted to do something for that country. In a weird way, I mean, you watch the news and Iraqis are uprising against their government, and I'm really encouraged to see that actually. Because that's how you make change. You know, we tried to force the change on them, but change needs to happen from within Iraq, and I think I'm seeing young people in Iraq finally uprising, and saying, "You know, that's not the Iraq we want. We want to build a different kind of Iraq." You know, that works for all of us. I'm very hopeful that will lead to some major changes in Iraq. And hopefully, it becomes a country like it was in the '60s, where people were a lot more fun. Iraq has a lot of potential. Lots of oil, obviously, but a lot of natural resources and human resources.

BB: Yeah.

MAH: Hopefully, we can go back to a stable country where my parents can visit. Go see their family.

BB: Would you ever consider going back?

MAH: Yeah, for sure. I mean, you've got to think, Iraq has got some of the oldest civilizations in the world. Why wouldn't you want to visit that? Visit the city of [unclear] or Babylon, you

know what I mean? I mean that's pretty cool. That's where civilization started so. Of course, I'd want to take my kids to see where I was born, the city I was raised in, and things like that, you know. Who wouldn't want to do that?

BB: Yeah, exactly.

MAH: See my cousins and my aunts and uncles, all that. It would be good to kind of reconnect with them.

BB: So you still have a lot of family (in Iraq)?

MAH: Oh, yeah, we have large, large families. On both sides of the family. Huge families. You know the funny this is that now you've got WhatsApp and Viper, and you can communicate with them through Facebook, obviously.

BB: Yeah, so you do communicate with them?

MAH: Oh, yeah. Twenty-first century made it easier. When we first came in 1992, we still had to write letters, you know what I mean? No email or any of that.

BB: It's definitely better now.

MAH: Much better.

BB: That's great. Thank you.

MAH: No problem. I have to run soon, I'm sorry.

BB: Yeah, of course.

MAH: If you have any other questions...

BB: Do you have anything else to add?

MAH: I thank you for what you guys are doing. Really appreciate it. Hopefully you guys can tell a story, you know?

BB: Yeah. Thank you so much.

MAH: It was nice meeting you guys.